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Literary networks in the Horn of Africa: Oromo and Amharic intellectual histories

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Scholarship on Ethiopian and African literature

In his 1971 study on *Four African Literatures*, Albert Gérard states that “no imaginative literature seems to have been produced in any of the Non-Amharic vernaculars of Ethiopia” so that “the phrase Amharic literature can legitimately be used nowadays as a synonym for Ethiopian literature” (1971: 272). This remark reflects a broader bias in Ethiopian literary scholarship. Ethiopia has over 80 languages, some of them spoken by millions of people, but scholars throughout the twentieth century have largely privileged the study of Geez and Amharic traditions¹. These two languages were considered “the virtually exclusive carriers of Ethiopian civilization, literature and intellectual prestige”, in the now infamous words of Edward Ullendorff (1960: 116). Other language-traditions, one may deduce from Ullendorff’s statement, were not as prestigious, aesthetically accomplished, or even ‘civilised’. The scholarly dismissal of non-Amharic literatures had strong political reverberations. For the majority of the twentieth century, successive Ethiopian rulers attempted to impose Amharic as the only national language. By belittling the literary heritage of non-Amharic traditions, scholars like Gérard lent support and legitimacy to the Ethiopian state’s linguistic centralism. Some of the prime targets of the state’s policy of Amharisation were Oromo-speaking people, whose literature, as a result, was systematically marginalised. Literary scholarship has been, from this point of view, firmly on the side of the state.

Only recently has Oromo literature received a degree of scholarly attention, but its development remains for the most part understudied, as are other smaller Ethiopian language-traditions. Current literary scholarship in Ethiopia is characterised by monolingual approaches that tend to present different language-traditions as internally-homogeneous blocs in antagonistic relations with each other. This linguistic nationalism reflects the rigidification of ethnic identities following the post-1991 restructuring

of the state along ethno-federalist lines. As a result, comparative approaches bringing together two or more languages are almost non-existent. And yet, Ethiopian literary history saw not only antagonism, but also intellectual exchanges, parallel developments, thematic synergies, and shared political concerns between different traditions. Only multilingual methodologies can fully capture such complex pattern of linkages and disjunctions.

In conducting a comparative study of literatures in two indigenous African languages, we are consciously departing from current ways of studying African-language literatures. When studies of literatures in African languages adopt a comparative lens, it is almost always to discuss an intersection between Afrophone and Europhone writing. Even works entirely dedicated to African-language literatures tend to present the various traditions as existing side by side, oblivious of one another². Sara Marzagora (2015) analysed the reasons and implications for this methodological split, advocating a criticism able to valorise the ‘connectivities’ and ‘disconnectivities’ between different languagetraditions. This chapter builds on her call by examining the linkages and disjunctions between Oromo and Amharic-language networks. To narrow the scope of the analysis, we will look at written literature only, although we are keenly aware of the rich expressive role played by Amharic and Oromo oratures. We are not aiming at giving comprehensive historical picture of the two literary traditions, but rather to offer a typology of how their interaction can be studied.

Studying literary networks: theory and methodology

A methodology focused on networks allows us to move beyond the nation as a unit of analysis. While national (and nationalist) literary histories have rigidly assumed that state borders coincide with literary borders, an approach based on networks, in Vilashini Cooppan’s words, “allows us to highlight the principle of circulation, sedimentation, and linkage; distinct objects such as languages, cultures, identities, and aesthetic forms that move rhizomatically” (2013: 616). Cooppan argues that literature “lends itself to the network model, whether the intersecting lines that link individual national works to one another in patterns of what used to be called literary influence or the recent world-scale models of circulation and interaction that go beyond the author-text system to reflect on various currencies of flow, including the material histories of publication, translation, adaptation” (2012: 196). In this chapter, we will employ a loose definition of literary networks based on three factors. Firstly, we will look at the physical circulation of literary texts, and, as a corollary, of genres and themes: where are the texts read? How far do they circulate? This also includes translations: from what languages do Ethiopian intellectuals translate? What are their literary influences and the literary traditions they contribute to? The second factor in defining a literary network is the location of cultural infrastructures such as publishing houses, bookstores, theatres, and schools, or in other words, the physical apparatus of cultural production. The third defining feature of a network is the intellectuals themselves, their location, their travels, and their interpersonal relations. While the chapter identifies general trends, our analysis will

remain open-ended. Ethiopian intellectual history is still under-researched, comprehensive studies are missing, and the little information in our possession does not allow us to draw clear-cut conclusions.

The evidence in our possessions shows that Amharic and Oromo literary networks were characterised throughout the twentieth century by a relationship of structural inequality, with Amharic in a dominant position and Oromo marginalised either *de iure* or *de facto*. Amharic and Oromo traditions were at the opposite ends of the system of power relations on which literary production in Ethiopia has been structured and continues to be structured. The history of the two networks illustrates, more broadly, the geography of Ethiopian centres and peripheries of literary production, and the ways in which they are connected to broader regional hegemonies. Amharic print culture was located in Addis Ababa, while Oromo literature, which for the most part had to develop outside of state infrastructures, had a much more transregional character. Transnational networks proved vital, at different stages, for the survival and activities of various opposition movements. Censorship and the repression of dissent are two contextual factors that force us to be cautious in our analysis, since they could easily produce the impression, reading the literary sources, that no opposition existed.

Our model to study the development and mutual orientation of the two networks will take the state as a point of departure (the *first dimension* of our analysis). Official language policy had a determinant effect on literary histories, and our first task will be to trace the history of language policies adopted by successive Ethiopian regimes throughout the century. We will then ask how the two literary networks behaved towards the state (the *second dimension*): did they antagonise the state? Did they support state policies? Was repression all-encompassing or were there possibilities of resistance? After having explored the key political mediation of state institutions, we will be in a position to explore how the networks behaved towards each other (*third dimension*). Did they act independently of each other, ignoring each other? Was there a relationship of conflict or competition between them? Did Oromo texts, for example, antagonise Amharic-language production? Did Amharic novels, poems and plays perpetuate a pejorative view of the Oromo? Were there moments of cooperation, collaboration, solidarity between Oromo and Amhara writers? Or does censorship make it hard to assess the relationship between the two?

Before starting our analysis, we would like to underline that the Amharic and the Oromo literary networks do not define two separate and distinct ethnic communities. Language does not correspond to ethnicity. In several areas, communities mixed and intermarried. Multilingualism was widespread, and a lived reality for a significant number of writers. Several Oromo adopted Amhara names, and thus attempting to attach ethnic labels to twentieth-century authors would not only be impossible, but also ahistorical. Networks do not exist in the abstract, but are made by individual agents, whose language choices can be influenced by their class, educational, gender, geographical or religious backgrounds, or can even be completely idiosyncratic. Talking about macro relations of structural inequality between the Amharic and the Oromo language, in other words, should not erase individual agency and its

consequences. A mother-tongue Oromo speaker could have a variety of reasons for choosing to write in Amharic, and we should not assume that the decision is necessarily due to cultural alienation or political submissiveness. Similarly, labelling Amharic as the language of power and Oromo as the language of resistance would mean missing a rich and nuanced body of evidence. Amharic, too, has been subject to state control and censorship, and has acted as a language of resistance for many intellectuals. An Oromo author writing against the state, on the other hand, could at the same time uphold other systems of power relations, for example gender hierarchies. Any abstract typology of interfaces between networks risks rigidifying and essentialising relationships that were porous, variable and often ambivalent. Positive interpersonal relations between writers of Oromo origin and writers of Amhara origin certainly existed even while Amharic literature represented the Oromo pejoratively and derogatively. The two networks were not self-contained and mutually exclusionary, but fluctuating, overlapping, and multi-layered.

The relationship between Amharic literature and Oromo literature offers an example of power relations between two African languages. In other African countries, the colonial imposition of European languages caused the marginalisation of local languages, which were for the most part relegated to secondary functions. In Ethiopia we have a case of an indigenous language, spoken only by part of the population, being imposed as the sole state language and marginalising other indigenous languages in the process³. Such top-down policies of language homogenisation should be understood in the context of the political transition from empire to state. The transition to statehood was violently forced from the outside in the case of European colonies, and internally enacted in the case of Ethiopia. For the Ethiopian elites, a unifying official language was deemed necessary to the process of modernisation, and modernisation, in turn, was seen as necessary to maintain Ethiopian independence against encroaching European colonialism. Only a culturally united population and a strong, centralised state would be able to assert Ethiopia's importance on the world stage. Language was tasked with ethnogenesis, i.e. with creating the Ethiopian nation.

Ethiopia was far from being the only state to proceed in this direction. Benedict Anderson describes nationalism as being underscored by the belief "that each true nation was marked off by its own peculiar language and literary culture, which together expressed that people's historical genius" (1983: 40). Alyssa Ayres argues that the "phenomenon of new nation-states legitimizing polity through creating new national languages, sometimes quite abruptly" was "globally widespread" (2009: 10). Political elites in the Global South believed it necessary "to collapse regions of intense multilinguality into a new national zone of monolingualism" (2009: 152). Not only in the history of political practice, but also in the history of nationalism studies, nation-building was thought to be indissolubly linked to a move towards monolingualism. For Etienne Balibar, for example, a single national language is required in order to produce the "fictive ethnic identity" animating the nation (1991: 96). The Ethiopian elites,

like several other political elites across the world, operated on the assumption that national progress and development would be achieved through cultural assimilationism.

Ethiopia: historical background

Ethiopian emperors ruled for centuries over a highland territory that was for the large part Orthodox Christian, but with sizeable Muslim and Jewish minorities. In this area, from the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty⁴ in 1270 until the late nineteenth century, education revolved around centres of religious learning. For Orthodox Christians, these were churches and monasteries, where a sophisticated system of education in Geez was offered to children and young adults. Since the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century, Geez literature had actively participated in the literary networks of Eastern Christianity. Churches and monasteries were the hubs of a thriving manuscript culture. Besides churches and monasteries, another prominent centre of knowledge production was the imperial court. Emperors sponsored cultural activities and attracted scholars to their court. Each emperor appointed an official chronicler to record the history of his reign. Some emperors were accomplished scholars in their own right. Collections of manuscripts were preserved in monasteries and imperial libraries, the most notable of which was Tewodros II's library at Magdala.

Amharic (in the central and southern part of the highland plateau) and Tigrinya (in the north of the highland plateau) gradually supplanted Geez as spoken languages outside the church. Geez, Amharic and Tigrinya are all classified as Semitic languages and use the same Ethiopic script. The earliest examples of Amharic literature are praise poems to the emperors Amda Seyon and Yeshaq composed in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century. By this time, the diglossia between Geez as the high language of written culture, mostly the preserve of ecclesiastics, and Amharic/Tigrinya as 'secular' spoken languages had consolidated. Amharic progressively acquired authority as the language spoken inside the imperial court (*læssanä nəgus*, 'royal language') and as a lingua franca of the Ethiopian highlands. Under Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) the imperial chronicles and other state documents started being produced in Amharic, making Amharic the *de facto* official language of the court.

At the end of the nineteenth century, emperor Menelik II embarked upon a series of military offensives that led to the conquest of large swathes of territories to the east, west and south of the historical highland core of the age-old Ethiopian empire. The old Ethiopian empire had always been internally multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic, but the range and scale of ethnic diversity encompassed by the new state was unprecedented, and required Ethiopian leaders to both rethink ideas of nationhood and develop additional policies for the new provinces. The ruling elites in Addis Ababa saw nation-building through "a centralist vision of national integration and a corresponding anxiety about the centrifugal tendencies latent in a heterogeneous state like Ethiopia" (Bahru 2008: 86-87). Cultural diversity was perceived as a threat, and unity was thought to be achievable only through sameness and homogeneity. Non-Christians in the southern lowlands had to be Christianised and had to

learn Amharic. The argument in favour of policies of cultural assimilationism was twofold. Firstly, the ruling class in Addis Ababa was acutely aware of the dangers of European colonialism. Linguistic and religious homogenisation were seen as necessary steps to forge the social cohesion that would protect Ethiopia against European expansionist ambitions. Secondly, the Amharic-speaking Ethiopian elites were also moved by the belief in the superiority of their heritage over the cultures of newlyannexed peoples. Assimilation was, therefore, a way to uplift and enlighten the less-developed cultures of the southern lowlands.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Amharic was firmly established as the official language of culture and politics, with Geez increasingly relegated to religious matters. The government's investment in education, deemed central to the modernisation process, led to the formation of a new Amharic-speaking elite (Bahru 2002). The government established new printing presses and new Amharic newspapers (Meseret 2013). Supported by these cultural investments, Amharic literature rapidly took off, and the 1920s and 1930s saw the publication of a number of novels, religious volumes, and history texts. Cut off from state-sponsored innovations, Oromo literature initially developed away from Addis Ababa through networks independent of the Ethiopian government.

Amharic and Oromo literary networks in the late nineteenth and twentieth century

From empire to state at the turn of the century

The bulk of Oromo-inhabited areas were annexed to the Ethiopian empire in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, but the transition to statehood took longer to implement. Even after the new borders were officially demarcated at the turn of the century, state institutions maintained low levels of penetration in the south. According to the three dimensions we use to analyse literary networks, this was a period when there was no official state policy on language and education (the *first dimension*). There was a disjuncture between Oromo literary networks and the state (the *second dimension*), but with occasional episodes of repression. And there was for the most part a disjuncture between Amharic language and Oromo-language networks (the *third dimension*), even if pejorative descriptions of the Oromos were already present in Amharic literature.

The political context was still decentralised, and the early stages of Oromo literature took shape across two networks that at the time were still relatively independent of the state. The first of these networks is that of European missionaries, whose arrival in the Horn in the nineteenth century opened up new literary opportunities for local intellectuals. This development was particularly significant for Oromo scholars. For them, missionary networks offered an avenue to formalise the study of the Oromo language and to preserve some of the Oromo oral heritage. The second of these networks was that of the slave trade. The commerce of slaves had been for century an essential part of the economy of Northeastern Africa, but intensified in the nineteenth century. Several Oromos were forcefully uprooted

from their homes and taken to other Ethiopian regions or further afield in the slave trading hubs of Egypt and the Arabic peninsula. In this forced diaspora, the lives of some Oromos intersected with those of European travellers. Acquired and freed by these European agents, many Oromos ended up in France and Germany. Some European Orientalists arranged for Oromo slaves to be purchased and taken to Europe to work as language and culture assistants.

This is how Ruufoo, a sixteen-year-old boy from Guummaa, arrived in Germany in 1866. Enslaved in his youth, he was purchased on the Ethio-Sudanese border by a missionary station on behalf of John Ludwig Krapf. Krapf, a Protestant missionary, had briefly preached in Ethiopia before returning to his country, and was looking for a language assistant to complete his Oromo translation of the Bible. The scholarly relations between Ruufoo and Krapf were characterised by a profoundly unequal power dynamic. Ruufoo was immediately put to work on the translation of the New Testament, which Krapf finally published in the 1870s. While earlier missionary work among the Oromo had employed Roman characters, Menelik II strongly advocated the use of Ethiopic script for the Christianisation of the Oromos, and Krapf reluctantly accepted that he had to employ Ethiopic script. Despite receiving little recognition at the time, Ruufoo is now remembered as “a pioneer of the early Oromo literature. His translation of the Holy Bible is one of the earliest written examples of the Oromo language and hence an important part of the language’s history” (Smidt 2015).

Another former slave, Onesimos Nasib, would rise to become the most prominent Oromo intellectual of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Born in the 1850s in Illubabor, he was sold into slavery when he was four. At sixteen, he was purchased and freed by a Swiss traveller, who handed him over to the Swedish Missionary Station in Massawa. Onesimos started an illustrious career as translator and teacher for the ever-growing numbers of Oromo boys and girls freed from slavery and taken to the Swedish mission. In thirteen years (1885-1898), Onesimos completed at least seven major translations of religious texts, including gospel songs, the translation of one of John Bunyan’s works, the catechism, a collection of Bible stories, and a hymnbook. The Oromo language team that was trained at the mission formed “a miniature Oromo academy in exile” (Mekuria 1995: 41). A woman named Aster Ganno would become Onesimos’s main collaborator on two major projects. The first was a new translation of the Bible into Oromo. Instead of editing Krapf’s translation, Onesimos produced a new translation starting from Amharic and Swedish copies, while keeping Krapf’s version as reference. Aster provided much of the material for the translation, which was published in 1899. The second project was the publication of a pioneering Oromo cultural reader (1894), for which Aster wrote down from memory a collection of five hundred Oromo songs, proverbs, riddles, fables and stories. The resulting publication is one of the most significant texts ever published in Oromo folklore studies. After 35 years in exile and a few failed expeditions to Oromo-inhabited lands, Onesimos was finally granted permission to go back to his birthplace in Wollega. His fame preceded him. He was welcomed with great honours, and the locals were excited to study with him. The school he set up, where he finally he got to use all the Oromo-

language materials he had compiled over the previous years, grew rapidly from twenty to eighty pupils. In those 35 years, however, the political situation in the land of his birth had changed. Wollega had been brought under the authority of Menelik II, and the Orthodox priests sent to Wollega to educate and Christianise the Oromos did not take kindly to competition.

The hostility that the Orthodox clergy in Wollega developed for Onesimos has more than one explanation. Onesimos was Protestant, much admired locally, he was highly educated, and had come home after several decades spent working with Europeans. Even more significantly, he preached in Oromo, a language the Orthodox clergy did not understand. Threatened by his popularity, the Orthodox priests filed an accusation of blasphemy, and in 1905 Onesimos was summoned to Addis Ababa to stand trial in front of the bishop of the Orthodox Church. The bishop excommunicated Onesimos and condemned him to imprisonment and the loss of all his property. Menelik, however, did not confirm the verdict, and allowed Onesimos to go back to Wollega, but barred him from preaching and teaching. The 1905 trial of Onesimos can be taken as a symbolic date that marks the divergent trajectories of Oromo and Amharic literatures. While the state gradually increased its institutional support for Amharic, Oromo was more and more marginalised and its development forcefully stunted.

Haile Selassie's reign

After the Italian occupation (1936-41), the government's language policy became even more firmly monolingual. As state power was centralised and grew more authoritarian, the relationship between Amharic and Oromo became strongly conflictual. New regulations in 1942 prohibited the public and institutional use of languages other than Amharic (Mekuria 1994: 99). A new law in 1944 made it compulsory for missionaries to learn Amharic and to use it as the only language of instruction in mission schools, effectively turning missionaries into agents of Amharisation in the south of the country. The 1955 constitution formally declared Amharic to be Ethiopia's national language. In the 1950s and 1960s, a series of successive curriculum reforms made Amharic the single medium of instruction in all government schools up to the sixth grade. From grade seven onwards, instruction was in English, which in the post-liberation period replaced French as the most spoken foreign language. Foreign languages therefore had a higher status than indigenous languages other than Amharic. Oromo pupils were severely underrepresented in the school system, and school enrolment and literacy rates remained extremely low in Oromo-inhabited regions. Teachers were mostly native Amharic speakers, and the language barrier meant there was a high dropout rate for Oromo students. State policies in the 1960s aimed at further reinforcing the role of Amharic as official state language, including literary prizes and a language academy for the promotion of Amharic literature. When it comes to the *first dimension* of our analysis, then, we are in a situation of *de iure* monolingualism. Amharic print culture in this period appear overall supportive of the state, while Oromo networks mobilised in the periphery against Haile Selassie's monolingual language policy (the *second dimension*). The two literatures

diverged in this period, and a deep tension existed between them (the *third dimension*): Amharic literature flourished, while the development of Oromo literature was blocked.

The nationhood envisioned by the ruling elite was not an egalitarian synthesis of all Ethiopian cultural traditions, but a forceful imposition of *one* culture onto others. This hierarchical nationhood was based on a clear power relation between cultures that, by nature and birthright, were ‘Ethiopian’, and cultures that, by nature and birthright, were ‘un-Ethiopian’. It is important, though, not to map language policy over ethnic discrimination. It is ahistorical and simplistic to characterise Haile Selassie’s regime as one of ‘Amhara’ domination over the ‘Oromo’⁵. Such a statement assumes an essentialised and rigid conception of ethnic identities that did not exist in Ethiopia at the time. Crummey points out that power relations in Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia are better understood on a regional, rather than ethnic, basis (2003: 128).

The relationship between cultural identification, language and social status was fluid and multilayered. There was, for example, a good degree of conflict not only between the state and Oromo literary networks, but also between the state and Amharic literary networks. Amharic was the official language and was supported by state institutions, but this did not mean that all Amharic writers were powerful. The authoritarian nature of the state meant that Amharic writers were not fully free to express themselves. The almost complete absence of cultural infrastructures outside government control, coupled with the institutionalisation of pre- and post-publication censorship, meant that Amharic writers were too subject to a number of restrictions. For the most part of the 1940s and 1950s, though, Amharic writers tended to support the government and its assimilationist policies towards the Oromo.

Oromo intellectuals employed two main strategies to assert their heritage on the national scene. Firstly, they attempted to reform the system from within. There were some writers of Oromo origin, or who were Oromo-speaking, in the Amharic literary scene. They had to write in Amharic and their Amharic-language works were similar, in both theme and content, to those of their colleagues of nonOromo origin. Those who attempted to revise the unicentrality of state nationalism were quickly marginalised. Yilma Deressa and Emmanuel Abraham were part of a group of Amharic-speaking Oromo who, as happens frequently in Ethiopian history, had risen to high ministerial positions through assimilation. Yilma Deressa was accused of giving too much importance to the role of the Oromo in his 1967 study of sixteenth century Ethiopia (*YäItyopya Tarik BäAsra Š äddästäñña Kəflä Zämän*, ‘Ethiopian history of the sixteenth century’). In reaction to the book, many high-profile politicians called for Yilma to be removed from his position as Minister of Finance (Paulos 2014: 47). Emmanuel Abraham was removed from his post as Minister of Education in 1947 because his educational policies were perceived to favour the Oromo and promote the use of the Oromo language (Zitelmann 2001: 170171).

The second strategy for the Oromo was open resistance from outside the system. The Eastern network of Islamic knowledge production was promptly mobilised against Haile Selassie’s government.

The first Oromo written texts had been produced within this network⁶, when teachers in Islamic schools needed material in local languages to reach out to non-Arabic speaking audiences (Gori 2015). Despite Haile Selassie's policies of centralisation, the network had managed to maintain a degree of independence from the Ethiopian state apparatus. It is from this network that one of the key opponents of Haile Selassie's monolingual policy, *Sheikh Bakri Sapalo*, emerged. A larger-than-life intellectual figure, *Sheikh Bakri* was born in 1895 near Harar and received advanced Islamic education. From his base in Eastern Ethiopia, he soon started denouncing the economic, political and cultural marginalisation of the Oromo. Against the government's attempts to dismiss Oromo cultural achievements, he strove to promote the Oromo language and cultural heritage. He translated algebra and geometry textbooks into Oromo, composed Oromo poems, and wrote three works on the history of the Oromo. *Sheikh Bakri's* work "led to the appearance of a new Oromo literature that reflected the people's day-to-day realities". The Oromo "literary renaissance" that he inaugurated laid the ideological foundations for the Oromo struggle for self-determination (Mohammed 2009: 102).

The literary networks that *Sheikh Bakri* created and in which he participated were truly transnational in scope. Fascinated by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, he listened to Radio Cairo, read Egyptian newspapers, and wrote in solidarity with anti-colonial struggles in Algeria and Vietnam. Some of *Sheikh Bakri's* students took refuge in Somalia and started an Oromo-language radio station in Mogadishu from where they broadcast readings of his poems. Preaching and teaching in Oromo was prohibited at the time, but what triggered the state's punitive intervention was not so much the content of his anti-government rhetoric, but a new script he created for the Oromo language in the mid-1950s. The script started spreading clandestinely through informal networks, and Ethiopian authorities found it in the possession of Oromo nationalist fighters in Bale. Accused of threatening Ethiopia's unity, in 1965 *Sheikh Bakri* was condemned to ten years of house arrest, and his script was banned. But while the trial of Onesimos sixty years before had set off decades of Oromo cultural suppression, in the 1960s Oromo nationalists were ready to fight back.

The Ethiopian student movement and 1974 revolution

In the history of the Ethiopian student movement, the so-called 'national question' was raised quite late, in 1969. After this date, the marginalisation of groups like the Oromo became a major topic of discussion amongst members of Ethiopian student organisations. In this period, while state monolingualism was still in place (the *first dimension*) the Oromo and the Amharic networks converged in their opposition to Haile Selassie's regime (the *second and third dimensions*). Earlier, the antagonism towards the regime's monocultural and monolingual policies was mostly voiced through peripheral networks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the opposition moved to the centre of the state in Addis Ababa.

The student movement, to which many students of Oromo origin belonged, was truly international in scope. North American, European and Ethiopian-based university groups collaborated closely with one another and actively sympathised with black civil right movements, anti-apartheid struggles, and transnational Marxist debates. The student movement did not produce much creative literature, even though their journals sometimes included political poems. The promotion of Oromo language and literature, though, did not disappear from the political agenda of major Marxist activists such as Haile Fida Kuma, who from his base in Paris put together an Oromo grammar (1973) and published a novel (*Barra Birraan Barihe*, 'When Autumn Comes'), using his adapted 35-letter Latin alphabet. Dafa Jammo's Oromo novel *Huursaa* 1973 (named after the Hursa river in Wollaga) was a didactic allegory that condemned gender inequality and the large dowries given for brides during marriage.

The 1974 revolution that toppled Haile Selassie's regime promised a new era of literary freedom. In the early phases of the revolution, the strict Amharic-only policy of imperial Ethiopia was loosened. The post-revolution ruling committee, called Derg, eased restrictions on vernacular publications, as long as the Ethiopic script was used. In the 1976 programme of the National Democratic Revolution, each nationality was given regional autonomy to choose their own working languages. A new Oromo newspaper called *Barriisaa* ('Dawn') was started in 1975 and published several revolutionary poems. An Oromo Cultural Association was established in the same year, and in 1977 organised a big Oromo cultural show to raise funds for *Barriisaa*. The show was held in the National Theatre of Addis Ababa, one of the cultural bastions of the previous regime. Now, for two days, it hosted singing, dancing, and the performance of praise poems by dozens of Oromo cultural troupes coming from the far corners of the Ethiopian state.

The Derg

The hope of change to be brought by the 1974 revolution would soon be disappointed. The 1987 constitution stated that "the people's democratic republic of Ethiopia shall ensure the equality, development and respectability of the languages of nationalities", but also added that the "working language of the state shall be Amharic". In 1979 the National Amharic Language Academy was renamed, more inclusively, Academy of Ethiopian Languages, but remained mostly dedicated to standardising Amharic translations of scientific and technological terms. Amharic and English remained the sole media of school instruction. The adult literacy programme launched by the Derg in 1979 was designed to be implemented in fifteen different national languages, marking a critical departure from the Amharic-English language hegemony in education. Oromo would have to be taught using the Ethiopic script, now elevated to the status of a supra-ethnic national symbol. The success of the programme was nevertheless patchy. Few languages had an orthography and there were no studies, textbooks, grammars, or dictionaries to support teaching in non-Amharic languages. Knowledge of Amharic continued to be

necessary for any jobs in the public sector, and Amharisation continued unabated via the literacy campaign, educational programmes, state-controlled peasants' associations, forced population movements, and government-owned mass media. Although on paper some of the most rigid monolingual measures had been lifted, *de facto* state institutions, educational institutions and cultural institutions remained for the most part monolingual (the *first dimension*). A certain pluralism was introduced at the level of government policies and the law, but neither Amharic nor Oromo writers benefited from it because, in parallel, political and cultural repression became significantly harsher. Punishment for any form of dissent ranged from prison and torture to execution, and censorship was pervasive. Both Amharic and Oromo were employed by writers to oppose the regime (the *second dimension*) but the politics of the two blocs took them in separate directions and concretised in different regional and/or ethnic nationalisms (the *third dimension*).

Perhaps the most notorious instance of the Derg's cultural crackdown was that of Baalu Girma, a towering figure of Amharic literature. Himself of Oromo origin, he had only learnt Amharic at the age of ten, and in a celebrated Amharic-language novel, *KäAdmas Bašagər*, he touched on the theme of how Oromos are pushed to adopt Amharic names. After the revolution, he worked for the Ministry of Information, but his political stature did not protect him from the ire of the Derg when, in 1983, he published *Oromay*, a novel ridiculing some of the Derg's top officials. *Oromay* was abruptly removed from bookstores and banned from the market, and Baalu disappeared from his house, never to be seen again. It was not a climate in which literature could thrive. Though some of the older Amharic authors remained active under the Derg, not one of the younger Amharic writers built a solid reputation for aesthetic craft and innovation. The government dictated that novels and plays be written according to the parameters of social realism, and plots generally reiterated government propaganda on the positive achievements of the revolution.

As it had been under Haile Selassie, writing in Oromo and other expressions of Oromo cultural identity were accused of bolstering 'tribalism'. The Derg considered the popularity of the 1977 Oromo cultural show to be unacceptable, and quickly banned all cultural groups and arrested some of the artists who had performed. No Oromo novels were printed during these years. Gaddisa Birru's first Oromo novel was written in 1984 but could not evade regime censorship. *Barriisaa*, the Oromo language newspaper, was nationalised, and it was decided that it would be sold on par with the Amharic weekly *YäZarayətu Ityopyä* ('Today's Ethiopia'). From the nationalisation onwards, it mostly published Oromo translations of the government's Amharic propaganda. The number of copies sold decreased steadily from around 20,000 to barely 2,000. Even then, many in Addis Ababa questioned whether it should circulate at all. *Sheikh* Bakri Sapalo had energetically supported the revolution in 1975 and 1977, but in 1978 the government branded him 'a narrow nationalist reactionary leader', forcing him to flee to Somalia to escape execution. He died in exile at the age of 85.

These geographies of exile shaped the increasingly important networks for Oromo language and literature. Resistance moved to the peripheries, where armed liberation movements took it upon themselves to valorise regional cultural identities. These liberation movements often relied on transnational networks of resistance, just as had been the case for *Sheikh Bakri*. Geographically removed from the Derg's imposition of the Ethiopic script, the different Oromo diaspora associations in Europe, the Middle East, and the USA communicated using the Latin script. Under the leadership of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), who led the Oromo struggle against the Derg, Oromo became the language of instruction in refugee camps in Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti. The OLF and its humanitarian wing, the Oromo Relief Association, published Oromo textbooks and literacy materials, starting a literary and cultural revival that would gain further momentum when the OLF and other armed groups, after years fighting at the peripheries of the Ethiopian state, finally managed to seize power at its centre.

The EPRDF

The Derg was toppled in 1991 by a coalition of armed resistance movements in alliance with the OLF. Once in power, the coalition (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF) approved a new constitution that turned Ethiopia into a federation of ethnically-defined regions. The new constitution declared that "all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition" and every region was given the right to teach children in local languages. Both Amharic and Oromo networks responded positively to the new *de iure* multilingualism (the *first and second dimensions*). In November 1991, the Latin script was officially chosen for the Oromo language in a meeting attended by Oromo intellectuals and representatives. The choice "had a huge implication for the future of Oromo literature" (Mohammed 2002: 225) and was praised as a stepping-stone towards "the psychological liberation of the Oromo people" (Kiflu 1993: 20). Between September 1991 and June 1992, textbooks for elementary curriculum were prepared and school-teachers were given intensive training to start teaching in Oromo. The first classes in Oromo were started in 1993.

Oromo literary production finally boomed. Within two years (1991–1993), around ten novels and six books of poetry were published, and five plays were performed. By 2013, the Oromo literary corpus comprised around two hundred novels, two hundred poetry books and fifty anthologies of short stories (Teferi 2015: 89). Lexicographies, grammars and documentation of oral literature also advanced steadily. This Oromo literary renaissance was strongly energised by Oromo nationalism. The new Oromo production denounced the historical marginalisation of the Oromo, valorised Oromo customs and traditions, and attempted to define, often in essentialist ways, the contours of Oromo identity. After decades of repression, Oromo literature defined itself in opposition to Amharic literature, using modes typical of postcolonial literatures to 'write back' to the former oppressors. Naming practices were for Oromo authors an important theme to show the alienating effects of cultural assimilationism. In the plots of these novels, Oromo characters are forced to change their Oromo name into an Amharic one⁷. For the characters, rediscovering old Oromo names and becoming aware of the history of their erasure

are first steps towards self-emancipation. In these passages, Oromo authors bring to light a lost multilingualism, although more than celebrating plurality, their main polemical thrust is to define Oromo culture as cohesive and internally homogeneous. The legally-enshrined multilingualism, therefore, did not mark the end of hostilities between the Oromo and the Amharic literary networks (*third dimension*). Oromo writers were finally free to publicly antagonise the Amharic-language heritage, and the tone of the new Oromo publications remained deeply adversarial.

The divisions between the two literatures, however, is not so rigid. While recent Amharic writers such as Adam Reta nostalgically uphold the old imperial nationalism, Fiqre Marqos Desta has chosen to write about the people whose voice was never heard in the Amharic literary tradition. His ethnographic novels in Amharic talk about the Hamar, Kio, Ebore and other ‘minor’ ethnic groups in the south-western parts of Ethiopia. He also incorporates linguistic elements from the community about whom he is writing, meaning that his writing style takes account of linguistic diversity. Tesfaye Gebreab has been praised as the writer who created the first Oromo protagonist in the history of Amharic literature⁸. Born from an Eritrean family in Bishoftu (a town now in Oromia, south of Addis Ababa), Tesfaye defines himself as an Oromo by experience and attachment, and his Amharic novels condemn the historical subjugation of the Oromo. He has been accused by the EPRDF and its supporters of being an agent of the Eritrean government, and of having been paid to destabilise Ethiopia. Tesfaye mixes in several Oromo words in his Amharic, and his novels include some Oromo oral poems in Latin script.

The two literary traditions also share some thematic synergies. Both Amharic and Oromo writers show deep concern for the exploitation of peasants in the countryside. A recurrent character in Oromo novels is the ruthless Amhara landlord, who exploits the labour of Oromo farmers. An example of this trope is *Ras*⁹ Getaw in *Yoomi Laataa* (‘When Will It Be?’), a 2011 historical novel by veteran journalist Isayas Hordofa. *Ras* Getaw defends Menelik’s conquests and the cultural superiority of Amharic. The theme of the elitist, conservative and callous landlord had been a staple of Amharic literary production throughout the twentieth century. Members of the landowning class are represented in Amharic literature as arrogant and self-entitled; they enjoy their hereditary privileges, live a wealthy life of indolence and indulgence, and ruthlessly exploit their tenants through taxes and tributes.

Fitawrari Mäšaša in Haddis Alemayehu’s *Fəḳər Əskä Mäḳabər*, Wäyzaro Asäggaš in Daniachew Worku’s *Adäfrəs*, and *Fitawrari* Woldu in Daniachew’s other novel *The Thirteenth Sun* offer good examples of this trope. Yet, while Amharic writers tackle this problem from the point of view of class, Oromo writers foreground ethnicity and gender as other fundamental sources of discrimination. From this angle, Oromo literature does not merely antagonise Amharic literature, but also expands and complicates the significant geographies that Amharic writers have in mind. The same is true for gender. Both Amharic and Oromo literatures ask questions about the changing nature of gender roles. Amharic writers hardly ever look at ethnicity as a further source of discrimination for some women, while in the Oromo context, the oppression of women has three dimensions: gender, class and ethnicity.

The twenty-first century

Despite the multilingual promises of the new constitution, repression against Oromo cultural expression has re-intensified after the national elections in 2005 (the *first dimension*). Oromo writers are often accused of undermining the unity of the state. Many have been arrested and jailed or have had to escape abroad. Oromo authors, together with some prominent Amharic writers, have been deeply critical of the government (the *second dimension*). The literary scene in Ethiopia is still strongly skewed in favour of Amharic, and increasingly so over the last few years. Amharic writers have at their disposal a large infrastructural network of Amharic-language television, radio, cinemas and publishers, while publication and dissemination venues are far fewer for Oromo writers. This severely affects literary production, since radio and television have been energising factors for both Oromo and Amharic traditions. Novels and short stories are narrated on the radio, and several radio programmes read proverbs, idiomatic expressions and uncommon words, thus contributing to preserving the oral heritage, but also giving writers materials and inspiration. Films and television shows give writers the chance to fine-tune their style and try their hand at screenwriting.

University syllabi on Ethiopian literature cover Oromo, Amharic, Geez and English writings, but Geez and Amharic continue to dominate class time. The Ethiopian Writers Association sometimes publishes works in languages other than Amharic, but the slow pace of this multilingual opening has driven dissatisfied Oromo scholars to establish a separate Oromo Writers Association (OWA). Oromo women writers are markedly underrepresented in the Ethiopian Women Writers Association. The government's crackdown on freedom of expression has severely affected the OWA. Censorship is pervasive, and suspicious printed material often destroyed. This has meant, for Amharic and Oromo literatures, that diaspora groups in the USA, and to a lesser extent in Europe, are now pivotal agents of literary production and circulation. Each of the two traditions can count on a transnational network of television channels, news portals, conferences and events through which to promote and stimulate literary pursuits. Social media such as Facebook have been used as a springboard by young writers in search of an audience. The disconnect between the Amharic and the Oromo tradition is particularly evident when it comes to translations. There are very few translations from Oromo to Amharic and vice versa. Amharic and Oromo writers tend to translate from foreign languages into their own. In the diaspora, the Amharic and Oromo literary scenes are even more polarised, with very little communication between the two (the *third dimension*). A thriving future for the two traditions is very much contingent on an authentic democratisation of the Ethiopian cultural and political space.

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¹ And, to a minor extent, also Tigrinya.

² Gérard's books on African language literatures, for example, discuss individual languages in separate chapters, rather than in terms of actual interaction (1981).

³ From this point of view, Amharic in Ethiopia could be compared to Swahili in Tanzania.

⁴ A ruling dynasty that claimed to descend from the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

⁵ Asafa Jalata has been the most prolific scholar to promote such characterisation, but the argument is common in Oromo nationalist scholarship. For a critical assessment of this position, see Triulzi (2002).

⁶ Not all Oromo were Muslim, though. Many were Christians or practiced traditional religions. ⁷ See Teferi (2015) for examples.

⁸ Hunde Dhugassa (2012). Hunde further elaborates that "Even though many [Amharic] authors have tried to insert Oromo characters in their works, none has had the courage to put them at the helm of their efforts". ⁹ A high-level aristocratic and military title.